Lafayette Historical Society NEWS
Enlightening Our Community

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Located on the Lower Level of the Lafayette Library
Please note our new email address: lafayettehistory@fastmail.com

ROOTED IN TIME: ORCHARD NURSERY

Celebrating 80 Years in Lafayette's History

From Ranch to Nursery Roots (1935-1945)

Before it became a beloved destination—before azaleas, African violets, Christmas elves, and the Giants' scoreboard—Orchard Nursery was just ranch land along the winding road into Lafayette.

In 1935, Dr. James Kergan and his family put down roots in Lafayette, tending a small ranch with cattle and a large pear orchard, along with a roadside fruit stand on the land that would become Orchard Nursery. The name "Lazy K" comes from the design of their cattle brand—the "Rocking K"—used on the family's herd. Their Spanish-style home, known as the Lazy K, still stands today as the nursery's gift shop. Nearby was a sizable exercise corral for the family's horses, as well as a big red barn—once a stable with chickens scratching in the yard—that became a familiar landmark for generations.

Though the barn was recently rebuilt using some salvaged timbers from the original structure, its shape and purpose remain—a quiet nod to the nursery's earliest days. Jack Schneider's Lafayette story began a few years before Orchard Nursery itself. In 1942, while building his home on Springhill Road, he sold pears from his two-acre property to

Del Monte Co., and his success was so remarkable that he soon began selling pears and walnuts from ten acres owned by Mrs. Maude Hellman near today's Acalanes Road cloverleaf. "Mobs of people" drove out to "Honest Jack's Fruit Stand" during the war, when food was scarce—"they bought like there was no tomorrow," he later recalled—turning a simple roadside stand into a local sensation.

By day, Jack was a rising chemical engineer at California Ink Co., commuting to San Francisco. In the evenings and on weekends, he tended his orchard, sold fruit, and worked on building his home. When county planning director Thomas Heaton refused to grant a land-use permit for a fruit stand, he mentioned that a nursery could operate in a residential area.

Without waiting for an answer, Schneider purchased the land from Mrs. Verona Kergan in 1945, following the death of her husband, and made the Lazy K house his headquarters. In November 1945, he opened Orchard Nursery—an opening recorded in *Lafayette Sun* ads promoting Christmas trees and holiday greens, even though the nursery lists 1946 as its official founding year. The following year, nurseryman Stewart Wade became his partner, helping guide the nursery through its formative years until Schneider eventually bought him out in 1961.

<u>A Partner and a Vision (1946–1950s)</u>

Orchard Nursery's early years were shaped by creativity and a keen sense of place. An unexpected boost to its reputation came soon after it opened. Three years earlier, Schneider had sold an article on his Lafayette colonial home, titled "The House That Jack Built," to Better Homes and Gardens. Its belated publication in 1946 brought national attention and many new customers. "It was my only claim to fame," he admitted modestly.

With guidance from visionary landscape architect Ernest Wertheim, Schneider and Wade began shaping Orchard Nursery into more than just a place to buy plants. Wertheim envisioned a nursery that felt like a walk through a garden—beautiful, inviting, and full of discovery.

At first, Orchard was modest—just a third of its five-acre property. Camellias, junipers, marigolds, and petunias filled the beds, and customers knelt in the mud to dig out their own plants. Garden hoses and fertilizer weren't even sold yet. Still, there was something special from the beginning. It wasn't just what you bought—it was how you felt being there.

During freeway construction, Orchard carried on as best it could, conducting business in the nearby red barn. "The horses don't mind—we hope you won't," they quipped in one ad. "Enter from Acalanes Road and look for us behind the biggest mound of dirt." In another, they reassured customers with equal humor: "No, we're not lost—just 'back the road apiece' from our former location. Only thing is, the new highway construction has temporarily hidden us from public view. (The pile of dirt gets higher every day.)"

When the freeway arrived, Orchard Nursery was pushed back on its property, and its familiar entrance on Tunnel Road disappeared. A new doorway had to be created on the freshly extended Mt. Diablo Boulevard—at what had once been the quiet back of the grounds. It's why, even today, first-time visitors often feel like they're "coming in the wrong way." They're not—they're simply following the only path the freeway left.

The original stretch of Tunnel Road is now long gone, buried beneath the Acalanes Road cloverleaf and Highway 24. Two neighbors met similar fates: the El Nido Rancho Hotel and Vallecito School. Vallecito survived (Bentley School is located there today); El Nido Rancho's charm was greatly diminished, and not so lucky.

Once the dust settled, Orchard marked its grand reopening with a celebration that captured the mid-1950s spirit. "Walk, run, ride or pogo… but whatever you do, don't miss it!" the invitation read. There were refreshments, giveaways, and—most memorably—a pogo-stick contest that had children bouncing across the grounds while parents wandered the new paths. It was a cheerful reminder that, despite the upheaval, Orchard remained what it had always been: a place where people felt at home.

That same year, a stylish new pond took shape—today home to Shelly the turtle, longtime resident and undisputed queen of the pond. And in a delightful bit of Orchard history, Shelly is celebrating a milestone of her own this year: 60 years old—practically a million in turtle years. Generations of children have leaned over the raised pond's edge to spot her sunning on a rock or gliding quietly through the water. Beside the pond stretched a charming patio with garden tables and comfortable chairs, where neighbors lingered under flowering arbors and children darted between the beds. The patio has changed with the years, but the pond endures, still wrapped in lush greenery.

<u>Passing the Torch (1946–1972)</u>

That torch landed in the capable hands of Tom Courtright in 1972. A horticulture graduate from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, Tom was only 26—and just three years out of college—when his father heard Jack Schneider planned to sell the nursery. "Dad told Jack to sell it to me," Tom recalled. Tom and his first wife even lived in the Lazy K ranch house for two years, and the first of his three daughters was born there.

Tom came from a true nursery dynasty. His father founded East Bay Nursery; his sister and her husband later bought it, and today their son continues to run it. Tom's father also helped Flowerland Nursery in Albany get its start. Meanwhile, Tom's wife Jacquie owns the widely beloved Alden Lane Nursery in Livermore. And now Tom's daughter Kathy helps run Orchard Nursery. It's truly a family affair in every sense.

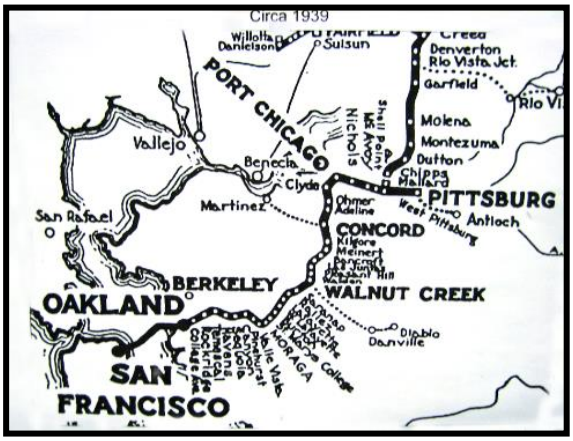
<u>A Family Tradition in Full Bloom (1972–Present)</u>

Over the decades, Tom's spirit of innovation has kept Orchard evolving. From barbecues to patio furniture to stamped concrete paths, he has always believed in taking chances. "You can't sell from an empty cart," he likes to say. In 1989, he was named Lafayette's Citizen of the Year—a fitting recognition for someone who has spent decades growing both plants and community connections.

<u>A Lafayette Tradition</u>

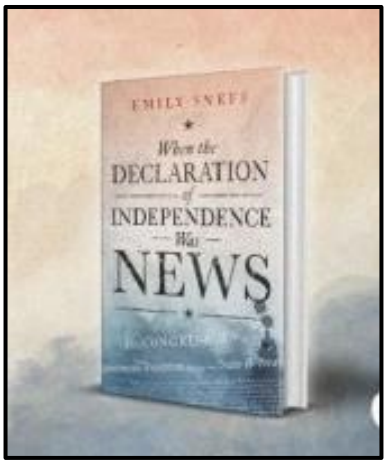
Through it all—roads rerouted, fashions recycled, generations raised—Orchard Nursery has remained a place to grow. Some come for begonias. Others come for Christmas. But all who visit find something more than plants: a little magic tucked among the trellises and blooms. Orchard Nursery isn't just a nursery—it's been a Lafayette tradition for 80 years.

A LITTLE HISTORY FROM "ABANDONED RAILS: THE SACRAMENTO NORTHERN RAILROAD"



The Sacramento Northern Railroad, a subsidiary of Western Pacific, came into existence around 1929, and was composed of the Oakland, Antioch & Eastern Railroad (also the San Francisco-Sacramento Railroad, originally the Oakland and Antioch Railway), and the Northern Electric Interurban; each of these former lines were in service as early as 1900. Originally electrified, the line converted to diesel in the 1960s. The Sacramento Northern disappeared when Western Pacific was merged into Union Pacific in 1892. When the Bay Bridge opened between San Francisco and Oakland, the Sacramento Northern trains used tracks on the lower deck. The tracks on the bridge have been gone for decades, but the subject of rebuilding a transit line there is raised from time to time. Meanwhile, most of the mainline and branches have been abandoned; some segments are still in use or were rebuilt for new uses:

- **Yolo Shortline runs the line from Woodland through West Sacramento south of Tasco.**
- **Sacramento's Light Rail line was rebuilt over the right-of-way of the Swanston branch northeast of downtown Sacramento.**
- **The Western Railway Museum has acquired 20 miles of the former right-of-way between Sacramento and the Bay Area. The volunteers of the WRM rebuilt the track, and restrung and energized overhead trolley wires along the way, allowing them to run excursions using vintage streetcars and interurbans.**
- **Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) rebuilt a section through the hills east of Oakland, between Walnut Creek and North Concord.**
- **The bike trail that runs through Lafayette was the route of the Sacramento Northern trains.**



UPCOMING HISTORY PROGRAMS

++August 6 @ 6:30 pm in the Library Community Hall: Emily Sneff presents the story behind the Declaration of Independence and how its message was shared: "When the Declaration of Independenence was News". This is a FREE program.

Published for the 250th anniversary of the United States, *When the Declaration of Independence Was News* focuses on the nation's founding document at the moment of its creation in 1776, before anyone knew what the legacy of the Declaration would be or if the United States would win the war against Great Britain. It explores how the Declaration was communicated to people in the new nation and around the Atlantic world and reveals the stories of the many people involved in the process of declaring independence, from printers to soldiers to diplomats to translators.

++ **Later in August**…."From Trains to Trails: The Story of the Sacramento Northern Railroad and the Lafayette Moraga Regional Trail". This year the Lafayette Moraga Regional Trail is celebrating its 50th Anniversary. Sam Sperry of the Moraga Historical Society will tell the story of this route that connects Lafayette and Moraga, why it was built, and what it is today. **More program details to follow.**

++ Be sure to visit the Lafayette Library to view our displays in honor of the 250th Anniversary of the United States: Watercolors of the Marquis de LaFayette in the entryway of the Community Hall, photos of historic Lafayette in the Homework Center of the Library, the story of the Settlement of Lafayette in the glass display case in the Library, and local Native American artifacts in the glass display case in the stairwell of the Library.

MEMBERSHIP UPDATE 2026

Welcome to our new members and to those who have recently renewed their membership or have made a donation:

Thank you for your support of the Lafayette Historical Society

Kim Bertolero	Wayne Lawson	Eric & Margaret Schreiber
Stuart Collett	Mary Ann Hoisington	Nick Lamel
The Grodins	Lou Cosso	Joan Evans
Sheila Guess	Stuart Robinson	Linda Ferrarotti
Robin Rudderow	Jonanthan Winchell	Kelly Daggs

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP DUES

Your membership is exceedingly important as it makes it possible for our organization to pay annual rent to the City of Lafayette for our space and be able to pay for our phone, insurance, and other needed supplies. Donations are always appreciated.

Student Membership: $15 ~ Individual Membership: $30 ~ Family Membership: $60

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Thank you to Ashley Battersby for sponsoring this newsletter issue.